

NOAA Style and Content Guidelines for the World Wide Web:

Section 2: Content and Style Guidelines for Category 1 Pages

February 1, 1998

2.1 Definition of NOAA Category 1 Home Page

Category 1 home pages are defined as the NOAA Home Page and the Line Offices home pages of NWS, NESDIS, NMFS, NOS, and OAR.

2.2 HTML Version

All Category 1 home pages and their supporting Web pages must allow access by browsers supporting the most recent World Wide Web Consortium HTML recommendation (see <http://www.w3.org/>) to ensure that they are readable by the widest possible audience. In addition, Category 1 pages are required to have a minimum-graphics or text-only versions for users with slow connection speeds or visual disabilities.

2.3 Page Length and Scrolling

As a rule of thumb, Category 1 home pages should contain no more content than would normally fit on three 8-1/2 X 11 inch printed pages. This is desirable for two reasons:

- 1) to limit the amount of time the user is required to wait for the download
- 2) to limit the amount of scrolling necessary on introductory pages

The developer should make use as much as possible of hyperlinks to increasingly detailed information rather than relying on scrolling.

An effective navigational aid for particularly long documents is to build a table of contents whose elements are hyperlinked into the document sections. Judiciously placed button icons or hypertext at the beginning and end of each section may be used to allow the user to jump to the "top" or "bottom" of the document and to the "previous" or "next" page of the section.

2.4 Document Headers

2.4.1 Supporting Text-Only Viewing

At minimum all Category 1 Web pages must provide the capability to view content with text-only browsers (e.g., Lynx or Web browsers with graphics turned off). This

implementation may be accomplished either by providing a text-only version of the HTML (and a hypertext link to that document) or by use of the ALT attribute with each graphic, IMG, tag; the attribute must have an adequate text description of the content within the graphic.

2.4.2 Graphical Header

A design scheme is established (see Attachment 2) for all header graphics. As a general guideline to minimizing user download times, aggregate graphic image size for Category 1 home pages should not exceed approximately 50 kilobytes per document; large graphics, while providing visual appeal, will tend to discourage user access as download times approach a minute or longer.

All the header graphics should have common elements in terms of design layout and color palette readily identifying them as NOAA home pages which must include the NOAA icon, the sponsoring organization's icon (if one exists), "National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration" spelled out, and the sponsoring organization's name spelled out.

2.4.3 Text-Based Header

Text-based versions of Category 1 pages will have placed at the top of the page, a string of text (standard paragraph size or italics) identifying the Web page's sponsoring office as it is represented in the hierarchy of the NOAA organization. For example, The Office of Coast Survey would have: "U.S. Department of Commerce/NOAA/NOS/Office of Coast Survey"

Whether to spell out the office's full name or to use acronyms is at the Webmaster's discretion. This string should also provide links to the appropriate offices in the hierarchy

2.5 Document Body

There are no special restrictions on what appears in the body section of a Category 1 page. It is recommended that it be kept as concise as possible; developers should refrain from using large graphic images (e.g., aggregate document size of greater than 50 kilobytes) that may hinder access by users with slow Internet connections.

2.6 Document Footers

Footers, the elements at the bottom of WWW pages, are extremely important in identifying the origin, authorship, author contact information, and last revision date of the page, and are often the best place to locate local links to your home page.

The footer content may be implemented either explicitly or as a hyperlink to a supporting Web page containing the required footer information. The following elements must appear in the footer section of a Category 1 page in the described order.

2.6.1 Horizontal List/Button Bar

Immediately following the body section, a list of standard links must be provided that may be implemented as a list of specific text-based hyperlinks. The list should not contain more than 8 choices (preferably fewer). The first five choices are listed below and should be displayed in order from left to right:

- NOAA Home (link to NOAA Home Page, <http://www.noaa.gov/>)
- NOAA organizational and personnel directory (link to NOAA organization and personnel locator, <http://www.rdc.noaa.gov/rdc/natloc.html>)
- Search NOAA databases (link to NOAA-wide database search engine, <http://www.esdim.noaa.gov/NOAAserver>)
- Search NOAA Web pages (link to NOAA-wide search engine, <http://www.websites.noaa.gov>)
- Public announcements (e.g., links to NOAA Public Affairs and/or organizational public announcements, <http://www.noaa.gov/public-affairs/>)

The remaining choices are at the sponsoring office's discretion. For example:

[NOAA Home][Personnel Locator] [Databases Search][Web Pages Search] [Directory]
[Announcements] [Option1] [Option2] [Etc.]

Additionally, a button bar following the same protocol for links may be fixed immediately after the body of the page. The button bar should follow the same graphic scheme, in terms of color palette, as the header graphic.

2.6.2 NOAA Icon and Organization Address

A Category 1 page will provide (italicized) the organization's name, street address (for main office) and city, state, and zip code. A contact telephone number is optional but desirable.

2.6.3 Contact e-mail address

A Category 1 page must provide a minimum of one contact Internet e-mail address for feedback on Web page information content.

2.6.4 Revision Date

All Web pages, which as a group constitute an electronic document, should contain the date of the most recent revision in the footer. The date shall be left justified and in the format:

<month written out> <numeric calendar number>,<four digit calendar year number>

For example, March 13, 1998 is an acceptable format.

2.6.5 Page URL

The URL of the page should be the last item displayed in the footer of the Home Page and is also left justified. The purpose of this URL is to provide authentication of documents that are derived from NOAA servers and printed by the user.

2.7 Color and Background

Category 1 pages should allow the default settings of the user's browser. The sparing use of bright colors for emphasis is allowed, but only insofar as it does not interfere with the readability of the text. Textured backgrounds should be avoided as they tend to impair readability.

2.8 Graphics and Images

By its very nature, the Web is a visual medium. At the same time, failure to use good judgment in creating highly graphical Web pages can frustrate the intended audience and render the Web site's information content effectively inaccessible. A balance must be struck between creating visually pleasing Web pages and the conveyance to the user of the intended information content.

All Web pages and particularly the Category 1 home pages should be designed to be universally accessible. Most users have relatively slow connections to the Internet--far slower, for example, than do most NOAA facilities. (For most NOAA Web sites, many or most users enter via one of the popular Internet service providers (e.g., America Online) using a modem rather than the higher data rate direct network connection.) Graphical displays, while being visually pleasing, may in fact prevent most users from getting to the information content. The main reason is that some graphics may take well over one or two minutes for users to download. From an ergonomic standpoint this is unacceptable and, in fact, anything requiring more than 30 seconds to download should be highly suspect. Similar arguments apply for audio clips and video clips.

For Category 1 pages, long download times are acceptable only when the particular medium is necessary to convey the intended information content. For example, a very popular Web site in the recent past has been NASA's Pathfinder site with photos from

Mars available on NASA Web servers in near-real-time. Typically these photos required several minutes to download over the Internet; this download time is acceptable since there was no other way to convey the information content. However, it would have been unacceptable if it were required initially for the user to download a large introductory graphic, sound clip, or video clip prior to initiating downloading of the Mars imagery.

To ensure accessibility of the intended information on NOAA Web sites, a few simple rules apply:

- 1) Use of graphics should to be limited to approximately 50 kilobytes, in aggregate, per electronic document, except when there is no other way to convey the intended information. Introductory graphics, sound clips, or video clips of size exceeding this guideline are unacceptable.
- 2) Use of "thumbnail" images with links to the full images is strongly encouraged for exceptionally large graphics. This gives the user discretion to choose to wait for a download or to ignore the graphic.
- 3) Each graphic must be accompanied by an ALT attribute to the IMG tag with text that adequately describes the content of the graphic for users not displaying graphics with their browsers.
- 4) Pages should be designed so that they are visually pleasing on 256-color screens (8-bit color).
- 5) Text appearing in graphics should be readable; text that becomes unreadable because of pixel resolution constraints should be avoided.

2.9 Title Tag

When creating an HTML document, the title of that document is of critical importance from the point of view of electronic search mechanisms. Web search engines such as "Yahoo" and "Alta Vista" return the title of the document when a "hit" occurs. Since, literally hundreds or thousands of titles may be returned for such a search, it is important that the title of each NOAA HTML document be highly descriptive of the information content of that document. A descriptive title tag is critical from the user's viewpoint in facilitating the search for information. In the absence of an adequately descriptive title tag, the user may be left to wonder why that document was even hit and may discourage further exploration of its content.

2.10 Use of NOAA Icon

A standard NOAA icon will be used where appropriate.